"Political Prisoner" Wins Release; Exposes King Murder Cover Up

by Arnie Passman

A hard rain was falling in Memphis the evening of May 3rd as American Airlines flight 361 sat on the runway preparing for its journey to Dallas, with connections to Los Angeles. The passengers were buzzing as a television crew turned off its lights and cameras and left the plane.

They had been filming a 62-year-old woman named Grace Walden, subsequently described as "someone who looked like she had lived with Howard Hughes for ten years." To this day Grace claims she was locked up in the Western Mental Institute of the Tennessee State Hospital in Bolivar because she saw the man who killed Martin Luther King, Jr.

Grace was traveling to Los Angeles with lawyer, author and conspiracy buff Mark Lane, who told onlookers:

"Her name is Grace Daniels -- she's the heir to the Jack Daniels fortune."

"And once we're airborne," said Grace, an ex-drunk, "all the drinks are on me."

Of his reasons for spiriting her out of Tennessee so she might tell her story, Lane said, "Grace has been terribly consistent over the years, in spite of being a brutalized political prisoner. . . since Dr. King was murdered."

Upon landing with Lane in Los Angeles (where he is making a movie on the King killing with actor Donald Sutherland) Grace told a crowd of more than a hundred people she remains convinced she saw the man who killed Martin Luther King. "It wasn't James Earl Ray and it's a shame that man's been in jail for all these years, because he was not the person who did it."

According to Memphis police reports of the King assassination, Grace saw a man come out of the rooming house bathroom King was shot from. She described him as about 5'4" tall, around 60 years old and "holding something long in his right hand," presumably a gun.

Later that spring, law enforcement officials acting on the key testimony of Charlie Stephens, Grace's alcoholic husband, extradicted the 5'11", 39-year-old James Earl Ray from England and ultimately secured his conviction as King's murderer. Witnesses have testified to Stephens' severe drunkenness and failure to wear prescribed eye glasses that afternoon. He even identified both a cab driver who came to pick him up as well as a police inspector as the presumed killer.

Two months ago on the 10th anniversary of the King killing black and white religious leaders of all denominations in western Tennessee issued a statement calling for the release of Grace and a new trial for Ray. While pleading guilty (under extreme duress and torture, claimed Lane), Ray told the court there was a conspiracy in the murder of Dr. King.

Following the statement by the clergy the president and the general counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union in Memphis sought a writ of habeas corpus to secure Grace Walden's release from the Tennessee mental hospital.

"And they knew we'd win that," said Lane who represents both Grace Walden and James Earl Ray. "And they knew this would all come out."

Faced with the writ by the ACLU, Grace was secretly moved by the court to a Memphis boarding house three weeks later. "The state wanted to get off the hook," said Lane. "They quickly brought Grace before a judge and had a guardian appointed without saying she had counsel and friends and that money had been raised for her.

"But they never expected I'd find her, and never expected we'd fly back to Los Angeles together."

On May 22nd Lane appeared voluntarily in the probate court of Shelby County Judge Joseph Evans with psychiatric affidavits as to Grace's competence and a videotaped statement from her. "There was a petition to hold me in contempt of court for leaving the jurisdiction with Grace without the permission of

her so-called guardian, a man named Larry Nance," said Lane.

"But I was never served with that. They wanted to make the complaint and let it hang there.

"They wanted to close out the record with the official position being that I was in contempt of court. But I decided to confront it directly and immediately, and that upset them a great deal."

Lane had been told by Judge Evans, on May 3rd in the presence of newspeople, that it was all right for Grace to travel with him. The judge also told Lane that guardian Nance had to tell him where Grace was.

In a heated, seven-hour hearing Lane told the court he found Grace to be lucid but brutalized by her treatment at the Bolivar institution. He went on to say that Nance was a callous and incompetent guardian who had failed to provide Grace adequate medical attention and protect her rights.

J. H. Rosin

Attorney Mark Lane: Pushing for a new trial for James Earl Ray.

Saying he would not consider returning Grace to Memphis, Lane was asked by Judge Evans if he would like to be Grace's guardian. "It came as a great surprise to me, I must say," Lane recalls.

"I said she didn't need a guardian, but I would be willing to serve at this point instead of Mr. Nance. And as my first act as guardian, I would move to have her declared competent and have me dismissed as guardian."

Lane said he plans to file a multi-million dollar suit for Grace against the state of Tennessee and Western Mental Institute Superintendent Morris Cohen, and is also seeking a new trial for Ray as well.

Lane is confident of victory if they do secure a new trial for Ray. "They will not have enough evidence to get past the establishment of a prima facie case, I think. James was not in that building, and his fingerprints on the rifle are circumstantial evidence."

Lane said a legal conference is being planned for Memphis, within the next few weeks. It will probe the best ways to gain a new trial for Ray in the state and federal courts.

He also said the Council of the Roman Catholic Church for Western Tennessee held a meeting in which it voted 17-1 in favor of a new trial for Ray. "Moreover, the priests of Memphis supported a suggestion of mine that there be a boycott of the state of Tennessee," he said.

"They sat down with me to prepare a list of industries to boycott in Memphis -- like Holiday Inn, Coppertone, Maybelline and they assured me they would cancel their 1981 national convention at the Holiday Inn Rivermont in Memphis as part of our campaign."

Holiday Inn's Rivermont hotel is where Dr. King was supposed to have stayed on April 3-4, 1968.

"But Robert Jensen, special agent in charge of the FBI in Memphis, maneuvered him into the Lorraine Hotel, where he was shot," said Lane. "Jensen is now head of security of the Holiday Inns of America."